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ABSTRACT

This paper provides preliminary findings on the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) Test given to all Texas public college and university freshman, particularly regarding minority student performance. Of all students, 81% passed all three sections of the test, mathematics, reading, and essay. The passing group represented 87% of Anglos, 59% of blacks, and 69% of Hispanics. The TASP is not a timed test; students may take up to 5 hours to complete any one portion. This format might reward students who persist. Students can take each section separately, and some can pay for study guides and preparation classes, concentrating on each section separately. Female Anglo and Hispanic students did better than males, but black males surpassed black females. Failures in reading were quite small. Females failed mathematics at almost twice the rate they failed writing, whereas males failed writing at about twice the rate they failed mathematics. Failure on the writing section of the test is a sign of particular trouble. Apparently, students cannot perform in college without basic writing skills. This test is seen as a program designed for assessment, advising, placement, remediation, and evaluation as part of a program to develop academic skills. (DHP)

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Minority Student Performance on the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) Test

by

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Approximately 130,000 freshmen students attend Texas public colleges and universities each year. Each must now, by law, take the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test.

At a testing cost of $24 each, the initial annual outlay by the students and their parents is over $3,100,000. Follow-up testing will be over another half-million dollars per year. What are Texans and their institutions getting for this assessment? We get information in at least five areas.

1. Early on, we are getting general information related to performance in three areas, reading, writing and mathematics, which are deemed to be of importance to success in a college. These are performance areas about which much will be written in ensuing years.

2. We are obtaining identifications of students who need development help to be able to perform at the collegiate level.

3. We are getting information on levels of performance by a number of cross-sections. One partially disguised set of information will relate to performance of high schools. High schools will have opportunity of measuring the relative performance of their students against total pass rates on the TASP test.

4. Institutions of higher education will be able to make some assessment of the quality of their students in relation to to pass rates on the tests at other institutions. Some will say this is unfair, but undoubtedly these comparisons will be made.

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5. Colleges and Universities will develop more extensive developmental/remedial programs as a result of such a testing program. These will entail additional costs to the state, and in some cases to students whose time in college is extended by virtue of the remediation programs which they must undergo. The hope is that those additional costs will be offset by higher levels of productivity of students, greater retention and ultimately a higher level of education of the citizenry of the State of Texas.

These are laudable aims, but here are some pitfalls before their realization. One of those are the possible biases which may be inferred from the testing program. This paper provides preliminary findings on the tests given to date, particularly as related to performance of minorities.

First Results

On March 4, nearly eight thousand college and high school students in Texas braved the cold to participate in the long awaited first administration of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) assessment of basic skills for college. The tests are on Reading, Mathematics and Writing.

TASP has been controversial since it was passed by the Texas Legislation in 1987. Education officials had predicted that half of all students would fail portions of the test. Projected failure rates were higher for minority students: reading - 72% of the blacks and 59% of the Hispanics; mathematics, 74% of the blacks and 63% of the Hispanics; and on the essay section, 59% of the blacks and 67% of the Hispanics.

On March 24, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board released the initial report on the March 4 exam. Surprisingly, 81% of all students passed all three sections of the test: 87% Anglos; 59% blacks; and 69% Hispanics.

Although most of those who took the March 4 test were college students who had previously failed at least one portion of the Texas Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST), the success rate of minorities (approximately twice that of PPST) appeared significant.

The results triggered a research project so that we may track the success rates of minority students statewide and at Texas Tech University specifically. The research will test the hypothesis that minority students perform better on power type diagnostic tests such as TASP than on a time-test such as SAT or ACT. The research relates to a longitudinal study of minority assessment, advisement, placement, remediation, and evaluation as required by the Texas Academic Skills Program.

The research on the tests through the summer has turned up some interesting differences as related to ethnicity and gender on the three parts of the examination. More about that in a few minutes.

Other Tests and Ethnicity

Let's look for a few moments at testing programs elsewhere. In Florida, for example, there is a statewide standardized test for placement. Some, including Robert McCabe(9) of Miami Dade Community College, are concerned that the placement test is not tied to curriculum and cannot be institutional specific. Florida also has a rising junior test called the College Level Academic Skills Test or CLAST. According to McCabe, the CLAST is having a particularly devastating impact on minorities. The number of minorities proceeding to upper division in Florida is said to be in sharp decline and Miami Dade Institutional Data suggests that many of those could be successful. In his June 1988 address to AAHE, McCabe chastised at least two institutions in Florida that were screening students before they took the CLAST. The institutions would screen out those whom they were convinced would not pass

the test so the institutional rank would look better by results. Surely this is one aspect of testing that we will not import to Texas. McCabe notes that if the goal for education is to be more successful in meeting the needs of society, that the aim will be in conflict with simply reducing the number of students admitted by screening out the less than well prepared.

Eileen O'Brien in the January 19th issue of Black Issues[5] noted that the proportion of black men attending college has suffered the largest decline of all racial and gender groups from 1976-86. She draws her conclusions from the ACE 7th Report on minorities in higher education. While the high school completion rates for blacks and Hispanics are up, there is a contrasting decrease in college participation for these groups. High school completions for blacks rose from 67.5% in 1976 to 76.4% in 1986. Hispanics increased from 55.6% completion to 59.9% completion over the ten year period. Yet black men dropped from 4.3% of college enrollments to 3.5% during the same period.

Gender differences were significant throughout the ACE report. Interestingly enough, our current research also notes some gender differences in relation to the TASP. It also seems significant that Hispanics represented 35.8% of the 18 to 24 year old "enrolled in college" group in 1976 and only 29.4% in 1986. There are many social and economic indicators which relate to this decrement but so are admission and other tests such as the TASP a part of the total environment.

The TASP is not the only test to raise questions as relate to minority performance. The AACSB standards for college and university business schools are said by some including Charles Farrell[3] to deter minority participation. The GMAT, used for our business school admission test scores, are criticized because blacks historically don't fare well on such tests. Also, the higher than average grade point requirements of business administration

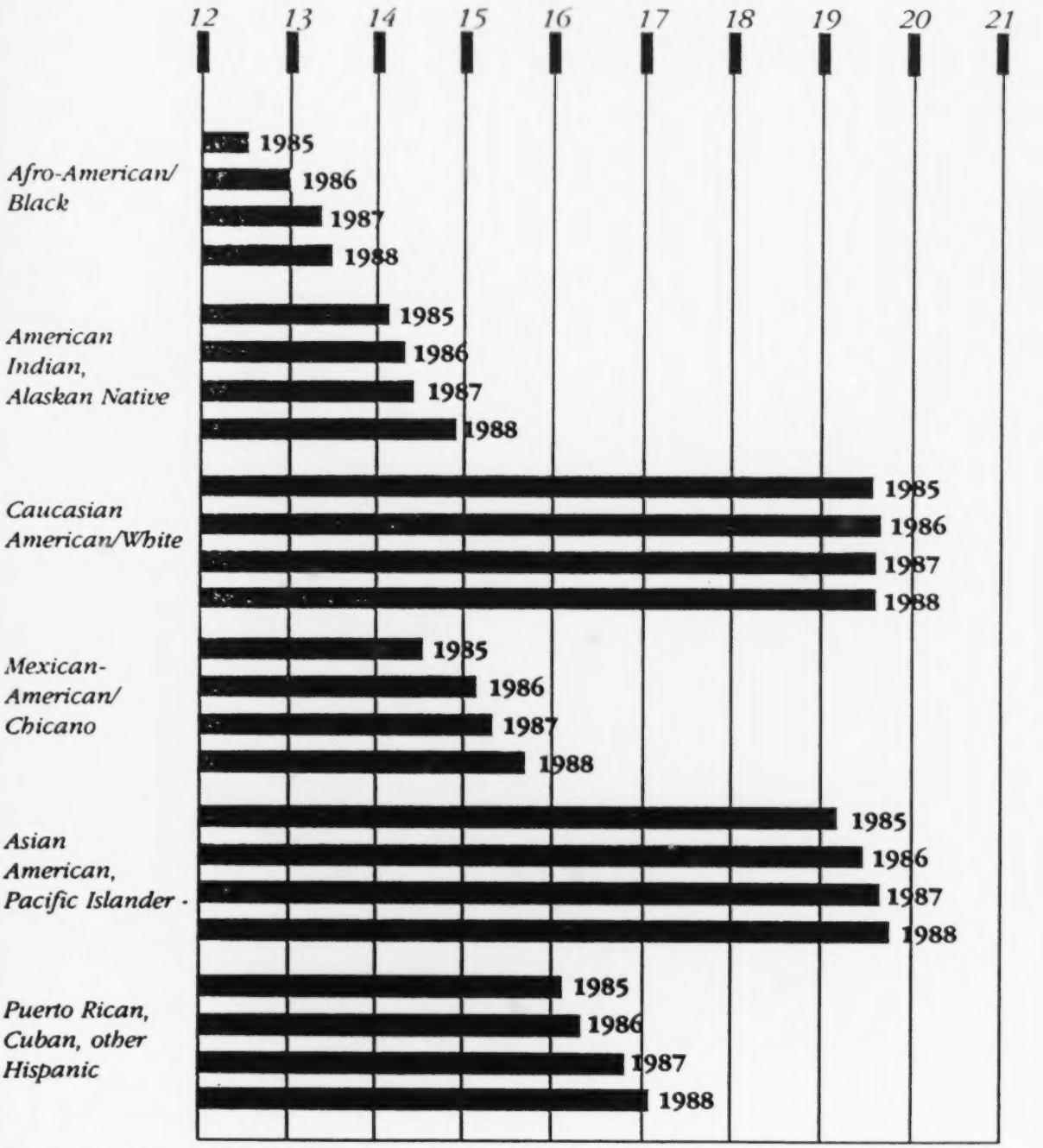
schools tend to limit access by minority groups. Those who enter with skill deficiencies may complete the first two years of college but their GPAs are not sufficient to enter many business programs.

Comparison of performance on traditional time type tests may be shown by information from the American College Testing program (ACT). This information(2) shows a four year performance rate for each ethnic group. It is obvious from the average score results that there has been increase in performance on the part of black and Hispanic students. It is equally obvious that the performance of these groups tends to continue to be much less than that of the white counterparts on the ACT. The one minority group which exceeds the majority population is that of the Asian-American/Pacific Islander group who scores have risen steadily and surpassed the majority population in 1987. No comparative scores are provided for the SAT but it is expected that similar performance would have pertained.

Differences in TASP

Scores on ACT and SAT don't necessarily correspond, however, to scores on the TASP. There are significant reasons for this difference. First, the traditional tests are timed and were normed in a somewhat different way. The TASP is a power test in contrast to a timed test. An individual may take up to five hours for any one portion. Within the five hour block allowed, students may take any of the three tests in any order, allocating their time as needed. At approximately half of the 117 test sites for the March 4 trial, the length of examinee time for taking the test was recorded. At those sites over 1100 examinees stayed in the testing room for five hours.(7) An additional factor is provision of "The Official TASP Study Guide." This study guide has extensive examples relating specifically to the test and provides for much practice. Almost 7,800 individuals took the TASP test on March 4 and between 2,500 and

Average ACT Composite Scores by Racial-Ethnic Background



Source: American College Testing Program

3,000 study guides were purchased prior to that test date. Study and preparation may have made a difference in performance. There is no ethnic or gender data available in relation to purchase of those study guides.

While the TASP is basically an untimed test, it is apparently not a scaled test, that is to say it does not necessarily move from easier to more difficult questions. By having more time, students may move through the tests answering those which they know and then coming back to spend time with those which take more study.

The fact that tests may be taken singly may, at least in the future, reward those students who can persist, and who are willing to pay the fees to address a single skill area at a time. It is possible, of course, that purchase of study guides and payment for repeated testings will mitigate against those students who are less able to pay. Typically those kinds of costs are not included in scholarship type funding. Waivers are available for at least the first test trials for those unable to pay.

Of course, part of the interest in performance has to do with persistence. When one looks at the published total head count enrollment for Texas Public Universities in Fall 1987, the breakout registers 7.8% black and 12.2% Hispanic enrollment. In that same year, however, the representation in the freshmen class was 10.6% black and 16% Hispanic. The loss rate for these two groups undoubtedly is greater than that of the other groups or the percentage of freshmen would pertain throughout the higher classification as well. Demographic information for entering students by ethnicity for fall 1989 indicates a beginning group 10.9% black and 17.5% Hispanic. It may also be of interest that 54.1% of the entering group in 1989 is female.(7)

Comparative Results

We know that too many of today's students lack a solid academic foundation. This is not just in English but in general education as well. Poor preparation affects all schools. Helen Astin of UCLA notes that although they admit only the top twelve percent of graduating high school seniors that half of their new freshmen are placed in non credit remedial mathematics and English courses. In another national study, it was estimated that 15% of all freshmen in some 250 institutions now attend at least one remedial class in English or mathematics. While stressing writing a number of programs recognize the importance and necessity for improved oral communication. And language means much more than just use of words as tools. Words represent a shared knowledge of culture. As Hirsch of Virginia(4) has stated, true language literacy is achieved only through cultural literacy. This may make an added burden on those who come to the university with only minority cultural experiences.

Now, finally, let's look at the performance of students on the TASP test which have been given to date. I will use a transparency which I would like to cover by parts.

First the statewide pass rates on the examinations to date as received by telephone from a staff member in the Coordinating Board reflect the following: 83.8% pass rate for Anglos, 54.1% for black, 64.2% for Hispanic and including all the other groups as well, 77.3%.

The Texas Tech University comparison rates are set beside to the left so you can see that we exceed the state averages but follow the same pattern throughout. The total pass rate for the university was 85.5%, which exceeded our original expectations.

Now let's look at a bit more detail for the total population have taken the test at Texas Tech. When we look at the totals of almost 1300 students we see that female, Anglo and Hispanic if I may be permitted to use Anglo as a generic term for white Caucasians, scored higher than their male counterparts. The cell numbers are very low, but that seemed to be reversed in the instance of the few black males who took the test at our institution. There were some other differences among those who were freshmen taking the test and those who were non freshmen, that is, primarily the teacher education students who took the test as sophomores, planning to enter an educational degree program as the junior level. Please note the numbers of non freshmen Hispanic females passing. The total passing rate shows 66% for Hispanic females. Further analysis yields some interesting differences. These non freshmen failed mathematics 2-1 over writing. This caused us to look at freshmen testing again. At the freshman level a greater instance of failure in writing occurred. In this case, the largest source of difference was in Hispanic males, although Anglo males also failed writing at a more than a 2-1 ratio over mathematics.

What conclusions can be drawn from the internal analysis of failure by type of test? The answers are speculative, but I will still attempt some. Of the total of number who failed writing within the Texas Tech University group , two thirds were freshmen while one third came from the group being tested prior to entry into teacher education programs. On the overall numbers, a similar size group failed mathematics. That failing group included one-third of the number as freshmen and two-thirds from the other. So, some conclusions seem to be that lack of knowledge or skill in mathematics may be masked or put off so that it doesn't effect ones progress through the first two

EARLY TEXAS ACADEMIC SKILLS PROGRAM (TASP) TEST RESULTS*

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL		STATEWIDE
	Tested	% Passed	Tested	% Passed	Tested	% Passed	% Passed
Freshmen							
Anglo	236	84.3	335	88.7	571	86.9	
Black	5	80.0	13	53.9	18	61.1	
Hispanic	37	70.3	35	94.3	72	81.9	
All **	284	82.0	389	87.7	673	85.3	
Non-Freshmen							
Anglo	121	88.4	407	88.9	528	88.8	
Black	2	100.0	13	46.2	15	53.3	
Hispanic	14	78.6	53	66.0	67	68.7	
All **	143	87.4	477	85.1	620	85.6	
Total							
Anglo	357	85.8	742	88.8	1099	87.8	83.8
Black	7	85.7	26	50.0	33	57.6	54.1
Hispanic	51	72.5	88	77.3	139	75.5	64.2
All **	427	83.6	866	86.4	1293	85.5	77.3

* First 3 administrations

** All includes other ethnic categories not listed.

years of college to a degree as great as that caused by lack of skill in the other tested areas.

Said in a different way, one seems to be unable to progress through the first two years of college without appropriate writing skills. This is borne out by the high rate of failure of freshmen on the writing and the subsequent loss of those students. As revealed by the test results we have to date, writing is the greatest problem for male freshmen.

Females who are able to stay in school seem likely carry a mathematics problem with them which shows up on later testing such as the TASP given at the end of the sophomore year.

Let me run some of these numbers by again so I'm not misunderstood. First, failures on reading were so small as to be relatively insignificant. Whether this has to do with the construction of the test or whether almost all entering and second year students are able to pass a reasonable test in reading with more than 70% achievement is unknown. Nevertheless, the reading did not appear to be a major problem.

About 95 students out of the total or 7.3% failed the mathematics portion of the test. For whatever reason, females failed the mathematics at about twice that rate above that which they failed the writing part of the exam. Is the TASP skewed towards males or away from skills which female students have? This analysis cannot determine such a conclusion. However, there is a popular folklore which mitigates against females' success in mathematics. This seems to be a clear area which should be addressed in the high schools as well as in the preparatory and developmental courses at the college level. It would be interesting to see state data on this matter and if it becomes available we will report it at a later time.

TASP - TTU

MALE FRESHMEN

		No. Failed		
	Tested	Reading	Math	Writing
Anglo	236	4	9	25
Black	5	0	1	1
Hispanic	37	3	1	8
All*	284	7	11	36

*including other ethnic categories

FEMALE NON-FRESHMEN

		No. Failed		
	Tested	Reading	Math	Writing
Anglo	407	1	31	15
Black	13	1	6	2
Hispanic	53	0	15	5
All*	477	2	52	22

*including other ethnic categories

Writing, on the other hand, seems to be a larger problem for males than for females. My reasoning for this statement is that males failed the writing test at a rate of 2-1 over the mathematics test. That is, 32 males failed the math test while 64 failed the writing test and only 13 failed the reading test at the freshman level. For the total group, failure rates were similar for writing and mathematics. That was accounted for, however, by the higher rate of failures by females who were non freshmen. Whether freshmen are getting better in mathematics or whether they utilize the study guide more fully is also not known at this time.

If we wish to aim for improved retention on the basis of the test materials we have in hand, we appear to be advised to begin to work directly with freshmen on writing and with females students who are preparing to teaching by assisting them in the area of mathematics.

The sample sizes for black students were very small. It did appear that there was greater need of assistance to females than for males in the data which we have.

An analysis by one of the graduate students looking at these materials is perhap more cogent. He said "the TASP writing test is killing the freshmen." It is ous that students have to learn to write or they disappear before the second level testing occurs. At Texas Tech, failure on any of these areas are important to us in developing a general education program as well as the developmental education program. With our current emphasis on Writing Across the Curriculum, all students are expected to write, while it does appear that some students are able to get away without participating in mathematics courses until later in their college career. One important factor not addressed is the multiple test failures by single individuals. For example, from our cell of

thirty-seven male Hispanics there were three who failed reading, one mathematics and eight writing. This could represent as few as eight total individual failures or as many as twelve. It would seem that one who failed all three would have many more difficulties in meeting the skill requirements of a college education than those who had failed just one of the sub parts.

We perhaps all need to be reminded from time-to-time that TASP is more than just a test. TASP is for assessment, advisement, placement, remediation and evaluation. It is a program designed to develop academic skills. The tracking of those students, minority and majority, who failed one or more parts of the test becomes a more important task at our university. By legislative fiat we're to have those students enrolled in developmental activities henceforth. Rightly or wrongly, some measure of the efficacy of those developmental activities will be allotted to the subsequent success or non success of students on the TASP when it taken again. That is an aspect upon which we will collect data and be able to provide at a later time. Here is a picture of the national Pipeline and percent of students by ethnic groups. The problem for minorities is evident.

Since each member of the audience probably is directly involved in the TASP, your experiences should also be shared with the group. Let me stop at this point and ask for questions and comments with particular reference to how you perceive minority students to be performing on the TASP at your particular institutions or test sites. To stimulate that discussion, I will again put this slide up which shows the total tested and the percent passed by ethnic group. Some of you may want to address the problems of freshmen testing alone rather than those which included the sophomores for whom this test was substituted for the PPST.

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